EXCEL-LENT EXPECTATIONS?

GEORGE HINTON TAKES A CLOSE LOOK AT A STYLISH NEW FIAT DUCATO-BASED COMPACT COACHBUILT FROM GRIMSBY

THINK AUTO-TRAIL motor caravans and you tend nowadays to think of upper-end models, often with tandem rear axles, suited to serious Continental touring or even full-timing. However, that would be to ignore the Tracker, a compact model originally based on the Fiat Scudo, which has now grown to be a 3.5-tonne Ducato-based single rear-kitchen layout design with long or short settees, with or without overcab double bed, and built to echo the full-size models.

Auto-Trail decided, with the advent of so many Continental compact offerings, it was time for change, so it took a clean sheet of paper and came up with the Excel, which it is promoting as a new brand rather than an Auto-Trail range, and additional to its present ranges.

CONSTRUCTION AND LAYOUT

A big effort has been made to reduce weight, so all four Excels have a 3300kg chassis, with the bonus of making the basic 100bhp Fiat Multijet engine the ideal power unit. This was all part of achieving the £36,000 target launch price. Three models are 6m (19ft 8in) long, with the garage model 600G at 6.4m (21ft), with excellent claimed payloads of 550kg minimum for the 6m models (which our test prototype failed to achieve). Their layouts comprise a common front lounge, offside kitchen and corner washroom combined with either a nearside corner fixed bed or fixed bunks or a single dinette. The garage model's transverse rear bed simply displaces the washroom to the nearside, just aft of the entrance. We borrowed grand-daughter Paige (six) for the weekend so we could properly assess the 600S with nearside bunks.

ON THE ROAD

Anyone expecting a softer ride in a 3300kg Ducato than a 3500kg version would be disappointed – subjectively the ride feels harsher if anything, but this might have been down to tyre pressures, which the door-jamb sticker proclaims as 72.3psi front and 79.5psi rear. However, a hard ride can be expected to show up rattles in poor construction, and there weren't any! In particular, the cooker travelled silently, though there was some rattling from the window blinds, specifically those in the cab which, surprisingly, are included in the price.

To keep launch prices down, the cab has remote central locking, but lacks the heated electric mirrors we have become accustomed to on most other conversions. However, the mirror glasses are the same and once set it should only be necessary to adjust them if you swap drivers, so it's really just the heating one is likely to miss, if winter touring. There's no rear window in any layout.

Performance is quite satisfying from the 100bhp power unit with five-speed gearbox, reaching 50mph in under 16 seconds from rest and well able to keep up with traffic, even on the motorway. On our uphill reversing test it DID judder, but only slightly, with an empty vehicle, the gear ratio obviously too high. Manoeuvring onto a level pitch with three people and luggage aboard was no problem.

ABOVE: Careful specification means you get a Seitz door, awning and cab blinds, but non-electric mirrors and steel wheels. Two-tone paint is a Sport pack option

In place of the usual problematical Fiat radio/CD that times out in 20 minutes was a detachable-face radio/CD player by RM Audio. This sounded fine but had the annoying characteristic of changing radio programme with no human intervention. This may have been due to its menu having been set to prioritise Traffic Information channels, but we did not have time to experiment.

Once again, a tyre repair kit replaced a spare wheel, a practice that still seems to lack support from the vehicle assistance and recovery industries.

The 5in-thick flat cushion of the rear travel seat gave insufficient support for my grand-daughter's child seat, which tended to slew sideways into the aisle if placed on that side. Moving it to the window position entails removing the 'L' section of the settee for foot room, but it is more stable there. Auto-Trail's Technical Manager is looking into this as it is the first time it has been pointed out to them and is not a unique problem.

LIVING ABOARD

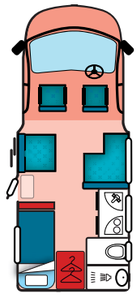
The expense of electric steps has been designed out, with steps of 14in and 10in in the entrance well. This no doubt helped finance the Seitz entrance door. A grab handle would be useful though and is being assessed for production vehicles. For ease of production, all layouts have their door in the same position, with a 125mm (5in) step up to the front seating.

The 'S' layout has a cab dinette with removable 'L' section at the front of the offside settee so that two can sit facing forwards wearing seat belts. This is optional with the other parallel settee layouts at extra cost. Then there's a 30in-wide settee below the nearside sliding window (avoids clashing with the door).

For meals there's a good-size free-standing table (21 1/2in x 37 1/2in x 28in high) that can double for outdoor use, but it's a real pest to get into place so three or four can eat. We show it lengthways, which suits two, but with one short and one long tubular foot, it will only fit one way round, lengthways or crossways. One instance where two tables on pedestals fitting into floor sockets might be more convenient? Good thing is that the cab seats have sufficient height adjustment to bring them level with the rather high (21in) caravan seating.

Because of the raised floor, headroom under the frame of the Heki rooflight is only 5ft 10in, but it is 6ft 4 1/2in under the dome of the rooflight, the same as in the rear of the vehicle, and at 6ft tall, I had no issues with it.

Upholstery is an inoffensive abstract beige design with brown leatherette piping, but there is an alternative in the Sport model, which includes two-tone metallic paint on the outside, drop-down TV/DVD player and aerial, removable carpets, graphite coloured worktops and blue-grey Le Mans velour trim, for an additional £1050.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Table can go lengthways or widthways, but both are tight fits; plating a meal for four on the kitchen triangle is impossible; gas locker has space for a pair of 7kg cylinders, but door is rather small

The three roof locker doors are brightened by silver-painted lower bands and strips of bright plastic trim. Other clothes storage is at the rear of the vehicle, where the wardrobe tops a chest of four drawers. We had problems with one of these coming open once weighted with clothes, but this should not be a problem in future production. The double-doored wardrobe has a 19in rail and gives a 41 1/2in drop.

Lighting is all by power-saving LEDs and features two strips in the Heki rooflight frame, plus a spotlight on each side, and proved fine for evening meals. There is no mains socket outlet actually in the living area, the sole power point being centrally located just aft of the travel seat backrest, behind the kitchen sink. We are told extra sockets can easily be installed by dealers if required.

Heating is diesel fired via a Webasto Dual Top unit located under the shower. It runs virtually silently on low heat settings but can emit some noise on maximum output via the air tubes that emerge under the lower rear bunk. Water tanks are all external, the rear-hung fresh tank being clad in insulation, while the offside-mounted waste tank has a nice big rigid outlet with easily-operated valve. This leaves both seat bases free for storage, the nearside one having a front access flap.

KITCHEN

The kitchen area is just 1.03m (3ft 4 1/2in) long, housing Spinflo's triangular three-burner hob with press-button ignition and matching stainless steel sink, both with glass lids. This leaves a similar-sized triangle, about 66cm along the front and 38cm deep (26in x 15in) as your working surface, and although male designers seem to think you can prepare a meal with both glass lids closed, we caravanners know you can't!

There is a vital plate-width shelf in front of the wardrobe (where the lighting is poor) and the result in practice is that you end up partly plating meals on the bottom bunk, so our first plea would be for an additional folding or sliding work surface, or both, such as a pull-out above the chest of drawers or a fold-down flap on the end wall of the bunk.

A clear wind-up Mini Heki rooflight provides extra cooking ventilation. Lighting is good, with the single mains power socket mentioned earlier. Production vehicles will be sealed around the worktop, but the prototype wasn't.

Food storage is limited, with our non-favourite Dometic RM7271 77-litre fridge that has the salad box on the door, alongside the excellent Spinflo Duplex oven/grill. There's no dedicated crockery storage while the cutlery drawer is inconveniently located inside the >>

cupboard below the oven. That cupboard and two roof lockers are the sum total of your food storage, unless you decide any of the four drawers beneath the rear wardrobe are best used for food.

A one-metre kitchen has to be extremely innovative to be practical, and this one just isn't clever enough, especially for four people, but it easily could be.

WASHROOM

We have seen various solutions to packing a separate shower into a tiny space in recent years, such as swinging walls and fold-away basins. Excel goes a slightly different route by putting a slim 7 1/2in x 14in oval fixed basin INSIDE a fixed shower cubicle. It functions okay, but the tap/showerhead doesn't swivel, so to splash your face over the basin means hanging the shower head on its overhead hook first.

The plastic basin has a matt surface and when some black oily spots came out of the new water heater along with the hot water, we found them impossible to completely remove. Two rigid folding doors enclose the cubicle's 21in square shower tray and pressure from the Shurflo pump is fine for showering, while the single forward drain worked well. Apart from the full-length mirror inside the shower cubicle, there were no additional fittings in this proto, but production models will have a toilet roll holder and towel hook.

The C250 toilet sits on a 5in raised plinth, with just 10in of legroom before knees contacted the silver plastic space-saving tambour door. Longer legs could dangle into the shower tray, where you're over 25in from the wall.

The loo's completely flat lid was appreciated as a shelf, for no other was provided and sole storage is a roof locker above the toilet. Wheels make emptying the tank easier for the young or infirm, but we would have appreciated a clip to hold the external access hatch up while accessing it. Production models will be bottom-hinged to solve this. Adequate lighting is by LED striplight with one above the locker and one in the shower, both on the same circuit.

SLEEPING

Supposedly a four-berth, the front double is only 48in wide for the top half with the seat belt mountings intruding, and shrinks some 15in on the lower (nearside) half, so it's tight when you are used to a king size at home, but makes a great single.

Assembly is fiddly, apart from extending the nearside slatted seat base, which just pulls forwards. An extension board lives under that seat too, but first you release two press-button locks to allow the seat's end panel to open on its lower hinge. We improvised with a coffee table from home, as supplementary bed slats to infill the L-shape seating appeared to be missing, but we were later told the table is intended to be used here, though it was not obvious from the size of the gap we had, and no instructions were provided.

Then it was a matter of sorting the cushion jigsaw with the long supplementary one from the wardrobe. Covers are only zipped for cleaning on the two scatter cushions.

The lower bunk is possibly the best bed in the house, having a fully-beech-slatted base that lifts for storage. Both are 6ft long, 2ft 3in wide, with 100mm (4in) mattresses, but the upper berth has a solid base with longitudinal beading as a token attempt at providing ventilation.

Both bunks have opening windows and spotlights, but the lower bunk light had been wired together with the main overhead lighting, so when you switch that off before turning in, you find your bunk plunged into blackness. Luckily we always pack torches! Hopefully, this won't be found on production models. A clip-in safety bar with cloth panel is permanently affixed to the upper bunk access, which also has a clip-on ladder, but Paige managed to scramble over the top when she needed to get up.

Pleated Seitz blinds obscure the main windows at night, with those pleated Remis blinds for all the cab windows. Proper curtains are also fitted, but the offside front pair were just too short to draw together – excusable in a prototype.

VERDICT

We can see where Auto-Trail is aiming with the Excel and the strategy looks excellent. On the plus side, it looks good, drives nicely and is well-made. But with its awkward table, fiddly and undersized front bed make-up, frustrating kitchen and imperfect washroom, it won't be on my retirement shopping list until it has been tweaked a bit further. ■

Vehicle supplied by:

Auto-Trail VR Ltd, Trigano House, Genesis Way, Europarc, Grimsby, NE Lincs DN37 9TU. Tel 01472 571000

Insurance: 01342 336610
Info: auto-trail.co.uk

ABOVE FROM RIGHT: Bunk beds are excellent with table storage just visible to the right; basin with showerhead for tap is worst washroom feature

Technical

RRP/as tested	£35,554/£36,749 otr
Engine	2.2 Multijet 16v turbodiesel
Max output	100bhp @ 2900rpm
Peak torque	184lb ft (250Nm) @ 1500-2700rpm
Transmission	five-speed manual FWD
Overall length	6000mm (19ft 8in)
Overall width	2743mm (9ft) (inc mirrors) 2320mm (7ft 7 1/2in) (exc mirrors)
Overall height	2790mm (9ft 2in)
Fuel/economy	Diesel/23.7mpg
Fresh/waste water	85-litre/55-litre (insulated)
Gas compartment	2 x 7kg
MIRO	2835kg
MTPLM	3300kg
User payload	465kg
Berths	4
NCC approved	Yes

VERDICT